

THE SISTERHOOD OF THE OPPRESSED

Since neither Twitter nor Facebook are suitable places for long explanations and since I don't have a blog, I am posting this open letter to spell out my position on the "Women in Secularism" issue. It will be a long letter, because, unlike some, I haven't been posting *ad nauseam* on the issue for the last year, so there will be quite a lot to say.

Totalitarian attitudes

First, since I gather this has touched a nerve in some quarters, I shall deal with the terms "feminazi" and "femistasi". As a general principle, I oppose the use of any kind of name-calling. But sometimes an apparently rude term is doing more than being rude: it is conveying a meaningful point in shorthand form. For the record, I am categorically NOT suggesting that the people I have applied these terms to are, in fact, Nazis or Stasi members, or would ever have sympathized with either of them. There are many of us who are proud to be called Grammarnazis and who know perfectly well that no aspersions are being cast on our intentions towards either Jews or Poland. It might be considered distasteful that the suffix -nazi has come to be used simply to mean "extremist" or "obsessive", but nevertheless, it has come to be so used, and The Sisterhood of the Oppressed cannot legitimately chalk it up as yet another example of their alleged victimization.

In both "feminazi" and "femistasi" the allusion is to certain totalitarian attitudes and the intolerance and suppression of dissent. Indeed, it was this, and eminently not their politics, that the Nazis and the Stasi had in common, which further underlines my point that no comment about anyone's wider political views is being made.

In the case of the -stasi suffix, it draws attentions to behaviours associated with the thought police, for whom anyone who dares to hold non-approved attitudes is automatically *persona non grata* and to be treated as an enemy of the people. I am referring, of course, to the unfailing response on certain blogs whenever someone has had the temerity to challenge the claims that have been made there. Any suggestion, no matter how mildly phrased or how in keeping with the principles of skepticism, that The Sisterhood might not be automatically and wholly right by

default has been met with torrents of abuse, and a pot-pourri (actually, dung-heap would seem a more appropriate metaphor) of accusations ranging from troll at the lower end, through slimebag, douche etc, right up to misogynist or even rape-apologist. Good heavens, we have even seen Ophelia Benson describe DJ Grothe's call for more balance in the discussions as "sticking a metaphorical target" on her!

Hysterical, bullying overreaction to dissent? Attempting to make it so unpleasant for anyone who dares to oppose them that others are deterred from trying it? Utter conviction that their own ideology is absolutely right and just, and that no questioning of it can therefore ever be permitted? Yes, yes and yes. That is why the rest of us are drawing comparisons with totalitarian attitudes.

And this is all just on the blogs, of course. Let's not forget the abuses of speakers' "privilege" at certain conferences, where audience members holding "the wrong attitudes" have been picked on by the speaker from the platform.

Finally, and delightfully ironically (given that later in the day we had people objecting to the "femistasi" term), Saturday saw someone on Twitter being harassed by one of the Sisterhood for having had the temerity to simply *follow* the decidedly unapproved @AngrySkepchick. Not even your "Follow" lists are now safe from the prying eyes of the Sisters, and be sure you will be subject to interrogation if your choices appear to deviate from the required standard! What fun Orwell could have had with *that*! (I see the person concerned has since posted saying she's distancing herself from @AngrySkepchick: fair enough, her Twitter feed is her choice; but it doesn't alter the fact that one of the Sisterhood felt the right to interfere in it.)

There are more reasons why the totalitarian analogy is appropriate even if, like *any* analogy, it is an approximation rather than an exact fit in every respect.

Let's consider 1930s Germany for a moment. How did the Nazis gain popular support? By exploiting a sense of grievance post-Versailles, by continually telling the German people they'd been treated abominably, had their noses ground in the dust, been unfairly penalized, that they were the victims of an international, Jew-led conspiracy, that they needed to rise from the ashes and gain their revenge and their

proper, god-ordained place in the world.

It was a form of madness that took hold of virtually an entire nation: it seems that it is horribly easy to persuade humans of their victimhood, and to create in them a dangerous persecution complex that then justifies (*sic*) any action against their enemy because, really, it is only a form of “self-defence”.

There are real parallels with what has been going on in The Sisterhood over the last year. Change the terminology a little and you have the poor, oppressed, victimized, unfairly ignored women being urged to rise up against the evil conspiracy of those men, women-haters, sister-shamers and gender-traitors who are responsible for all their woes.

The difference is that the sense of injustice among ordinary German people post-WWI was, in some respects, at least, justified. They really *had* had their noses rubbed in the dirt by the Treaty of Versailles and really *were* suffering more than their fair share of blame and reparations for the war. (Of course, I am not suggesting that Hitler and his cohorts were justified in how they exploited that sense of grievance.)

So is the Sisterhood's sense of victimhood also justified? No.

Victimhood?

Despite the endless wails of "It's not fair" that have taken up so much space on the internet over the last year, it has not always been easy to pin down what, exactly, our Allegedly Oppressed Sisters are actually complaining about. Sure, catch-all phrases such as “misogyny” have been bandied about with relish, but the exact form this alleged misogyny is supposed to have taken is harder to identify.

It seems to boil down to two things, with considerable goalpost-shifting between them. The first seems to be their feeling that there is a sexualized atmosphere at skeptical conferences; the second seems to be that they do not play a prominent enough role in the movement (i.e. they are somehow being prevented from doing so). I shall deal with the conference issue first.

In my experience (and I've attended and organized a lot of conferences in my time) there's a sexualized atmosphere at *all* conferences involving an overnight stay: people are away from home, probably drinking more heavily than they would at home, *cough* *networking*, surrounded by people who share a common interest, whether that's in secularism or buttercups or ball bearings, and who are equally letting their hair down and out for a bit of fun, and, moreover, with hotel rooms conveniently located right above their heads. Absolutely anyone can find themselves being sexually propositioned at any conference at all if they hang out in the bar long enough, and late enough at night. And please don't try to tell me it's never instigated by women and certainly don't try to tell me it's unique to secularist/skeptical conferences. It's just life. For those who engage in the propositioning and those who respond positively to it (and many do), it is presumably one of the fun bits of life. I simply do not accept that any reasonably mature, rational adult does not know *exactly* how to avoid getting into this kind of situation if he or she would prefer not to, or how to deal with it if it occurs. Note that I am talking about normal, non-violent situations in which no assault takes place. I am talking about the kind of normal interaction that, whether you like it or not, goes on wherever you get a group of adults letting their hair down while away from home. Of course assaults of any kind are always totally unacceptable – and, indeed, illegal; but to give the impression that such assaults are commonplace is to do a disservice, both to the women who will be put off attending as a result, and to the vast majority of men, whose decency is thereby grossly maligned.

To tear a movement apart, to provoke massive divisions within it, to malign the people in it, to distract it from the very purposes that brought the movement together in the first place, over something that is just a feature of life in general and not specific to the movement itself, is a tragic waste. Not just tragic, but deeply irresponsible.

As for the notion that women are allegedly being prevented from playing their full part in the movement, I said all I had to say on that subject on *Why Evolution Is True* almost exactly a year ago, and shall simply post a slightly edited version of that (also rather long) comment here now:

My background is in business. I have lost count of the number of times I have been present at meetings when the women said nothing and left it all to the men. I've been guilty of it myself, many a time. Was it because the men weren't willing to listen to the women? I don't think it was. Did the men dismiss our comments if we made them? No, they didn't. Did they try to stop us making them? No, they didn't do that either. Were the women lacking in ideas? No, of course not. We just didn't speak up. Crucially, many of us didn't speak up, even when openly invited to do so.

Similarly, I spent 7 of the last 10 years organizing events for business people: conferences, seminars, workshops, that kind of thing. Over and over again, I tried – how I tried! – to find women speakers. Over and over again, other delegates, both male and female, would tell me they'd like to hear from more women speakers. So the desire was there on the part of the audience to listen to what women had to say, and it was there on the part of the organizers too. And we didn't just invite: we encouraged, we offered support, we offered coaching, we changed the format of events to make them feel less daunting: we went out of our way, event after event after event, to encourage women to take a more prominent part. And almost always to no avail. There were two or three who were already happy to do it anyway and didn't need our encouragement. Another finally agreed to do it after her initial panic at the very idea and, despite being very nervous on the day, afterwards said it was the best thing she'd ever done. But otherwise, it was all for nothing. Try as we might, try as I might, most women we approached simply refused to even consider it, saying "Oh no, I couldn't possibly."

So I have to ask: Who was holding those women back? They

weren't just being given equal access to prominence as speakers – they were being positively encouraged in ways that male speakers were not. But ultimately, there was something in their own heads that was stopping them. It wasn't that men didn't want to listen to them, it wasn't that they weren't being given the opportunities, it wasn't that they weren't respected, it wasn't that no one thought they had stories worth telling and valuable contributions to make. They just didn't feel confident enough to do it – even when offered coaching to help them prepare.

So this is my frustration. I did a sociology module as part of my degree many years ago: I know the arguments about socialization and normative values, and structural discrimination and all that malarkey. All I can say in response is that, while all these things may be true to a greater or lesser extent, banging on about them does not even begin to help women achieve their goals. If we, as women, externalize the reasons why we are not being heard as much as we say we'd like to be, and seek to put the blame on other people, nothing is going to change or, at the very best, it is only going to change painfully slowly. It is a simple fact of life that it is always easier to change *our own* behaviour than to persuade other people to change theirs.

So there is an alternative, and it is this alternative that I would urge women to seize with both hands – whether we're talking about how we interact in our jobs, in our social lives or in the atheist movement. And that alternative is to take responsibility for ourselves and our own success. To view ourselves as mature, capable adults who can take things in our stride, and can speak up appropriately. To really start believing that we can do whatever men can do. To stop seizing on excuses for staying quiet and submissive, stop blaming it on men or

hierarchies or misogyny or, silliest of all, “privilege”, and start simply practising being more assertive. To wake up to the fact that, actually, the lack of prominent women is a theme in almost all walks of life, and many, probably most, organizations are aware of that and will leap at the chance to put a woman into a position of leadership.

I am not saying that all men, or even all women, are enlightened on this subject, or that sexism is dead. But I *am* saying that we women do ourselves no favours by assuming that the system is malevolently weighted against us, or by claiming prejudice when, in fact, we have been slow or even reluctant to take the opportunities that are there. The doors are open – but it's no good just standing on the threshold and peering fearfully across at what's on the other side. All we have the right to demand is that there be no special barriers put in our way on account of our being women: we should not demand that men actively go out of their way to make it easier for us than it otherwise would be. We still need to summon up our courage and our confidence, and step through that open door. And what I'm saying is that, in my experience, whether in the atheist movement or elsewhere in the western world (in Western Europe, at least), women who do just that will almost always be welcomed. We just need to DO it.

Yes, there's the occasional Neanderthal, in any walk of life. But it's up to us whether we let him put us off doing what we really want to do. Let's not give him that power over us! We can choose to rise above him (or sidestep him) and continue pursuing our own goals. And what I am suggesting is precisely the attitude that I have found in the vast majority of successful women I've met in a range of walks of life. In almost any field you care to consider, the women who have made it to the top are generally not sympathetic to the view that men or the

system were desperately trying to hold them back. They have simply adopted the tactics I am describing here, and have refused to let anything stop them. They certainly haven't diverted their focus from their goals to worrying about how men are treating them, and they haven't waited for men to give them permission to succeed. Are we going to say their voices and experiences do not count, *because* they have made it? That the very fact of their success makes them "privileged" beyond the point of having anything valid to say on the subject? That any woman who has achieved success doesn't count or can even be advanced as further evidence that "ordinary" women *can't* make it? Would that not be truly bizarre, akin to the Roman Catholic Church trying to spin Mother Teresa's doubts as further evidence of the truth of her beliefs?

My final point, unlike everything else I've been saying, *is* specific to the atheist movement. Activism is by definition controversial: we don't need activists for causes that are already widely accepted. This means that conflict comes with the territory. Activists need to be able to cope with that, we need to be able to deal with people who really do want to silence us and discredit us at any cost. It can turn nasty. And the religion/atheism divide – as I'm sure I don't need to spell out to anyone here – is one of the most aggressive areas for activism there is, largely because religion is something visceral, that people attach themselves to with the full force of their emotions. All too often, it is not a polite, nice, friendly debate. It can be foul. Anyone – male or female – considering becoming prominent in this field is likely to be letting themselves in for a considerable amount of really nasty stuff. There is no reason why women shouldn't be able to cope with that as well as men can. But I do find it hard to see how anyone who is shy about speaking up *within* the movement, in front of people who are broadly on his or her side, is going to be able to deal with some

of the abuse that will start coming their way from those *outside* the movement if he or she becomes more prominent.

Look in the pages of any self-help book you care to pick up. It doesn't matter whether it's on career development, fulfilling your ambitions, communicating more clearly, or building your confidence and self-esteem, the one thing common to them all is that *you will not find* a section advising, "Never miss an opportunity to whinge about how unfair the world is, how oppressed you are, and how anyone who suggests otherwise is a bad or ignorant person who's evidently just out to keep you down".

What we have seen endlessly on the pages of the worst of the blogs over the course of the last year-plus is just a tedious, counterproductive, alienating, divisive, pointless self-indulgence. "To hell with the movement as a whole, let's spend a whole year demanding that everyone talk about how hard it is being meeeeeeeee."

It is also deeply ironic. Remember the Women in Secularism conference the other week? How that conference was hailed by the Oppressed Sisters and their Approved Male Chorus! But did you see the speaker list? How many of those speakers were not already well established in the movement? How many did not already have a regular platform at existing atheist/secularist/skeptical conferences? How many new names were there, how many fresh new women secularists given a platform, given that there was no evil misogyny at work to prevent new women finally getting a break in the movement? I'll leave you to check that out for yourselves. Talk about "*Four legs good, two legs better*"!

Far from encouraging new women to get involved, all this hysterical and unjustified insistence on how dangerous our conferences are for women, how hostile our movement is to them, the indignities and humiliations they will be exposed to should they dare to set foot over the skeptical threshold could have been calculated to scare them away. DJ Grothe was, predictably, shot down in furious flames by the Sisters when he dared suggest such a thing recently, yet Ophelia Benson herself would have us believe she's been scared away from attending a conference because of the

exaggerated and over-the-top messages she got about the terrible risks she'd face if she went. Why should she be the only woman to react in that way? Why wouldn't other women also be put off attending, after reading the endless ludicrously exaggerated claims about how dangerous it would be for them to attend?

This is what is so frustrating about the whole silly business. The situation at the conferences has been exaggerated and distorted beyond all recognition, and any number of skeptical male attendees and one conference organizer in particular have been scandalously maligned in the process. What's more, the whole furore has only made matters worse for women: firstly, by effectively telling them they'd have to be mad to risk getting involved in skepticism; secondly, by consistently sending out the singularly unhelpful message that they are victims and will face nothing but oppression; and thirdly, by reinforcing all the negative sexist stereotyping that many *real* feminists have been working so hard over many years to overcome. For years women were kept out of positions of influence because of the stereotypical image of them as hysterical, over-emotional, over-subjective, irrational, over-delicate, etc. And for years, real women have been working very hard to demonstrate the injustice of that stereotype. Frankly, when I see precisely those characteristics being paraded with pride by people who have the gall to call themselves feminists (and to dismiss those who disagree with them as misogynist), I am utterly disgusted.

Since posting my comment on WEIT on 8 July 2011 I have been keeping quiet, not wanting to add fuel to the fire, just waiting for things to calm down and for us all to be able to go back to focusing fully on the promotion of skepticism, or secularism, or atheism, or pure science, according to our personal interests. But that clearly has not happened, nor is there any sign of its happening soon. On the contrary, the wails and witch-hunts emanating from certain self-labelled freethinking quarters have become more hysterical, more exaggerated, more self-pitying, more vicious and more disgraceful as time has gone by. And in the meantime, their bullying has led to many who disagree with them simply not having the stomach for the viciousness that awaits them should they decide to speak up, with the result that there is a risk of the views of the loudest shriekers becoming wrongly seen as mainstream. I do not believe they are mainstream. Many many good people in our movement, men and women, are sick and tired of all this nonsense, and are as disgusted by it as I am.

Many of them are deeply disillusioned with the movement for succumbing to paranoia and ideological demagoguery and for demonstrating the kind of hysterical irrationality we normally only expect to find among the very worst of the religious and the woo-mongers.

Real skeptics are better than you'd think from reading certain blogs.

Real freethinkers are better than you'd think from reading certain blogs.

Real feminists are better than you'd think from reading certain blogs.

And real women are better than you'd think from reading certain blogs.

And so I shall be silent no more. I hope others will speak up too, but even more, I hope we will start to see a renewed focus on what the movement is actually supposed to be about: the opposing of irrationality, rather than the propagation of it.

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